

Mary Agnes Chase

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Mary Agnes Chase was a dedicated feminist, activist, agrostologist, and botanist. She received many awards for advancing botanical science, for publishing many articles on grass species, for serving 60 years at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and for working with activist groups, all with only an elementary school education.

Mary Agnes Chase was born on April 20, 1869, in Iroquois County, Illinois. Her father, Martin J. Meara, was a railroad worker and farmer; her mother was Mary Cassidy Brannick. When Agnes was only two, her father died. After his death, Agnes, her mother, and her five siblings moved to Chicago. Agnes' formal education ended after elementary school because she had to perform various jobs to help with household expenses. In 1888, while working for the *School Herald* as a proofreader, she met the editor, William Chase, and they married shortly thereafter. Unfortunately, he died after only one year of marriage.

In spite of these setbacks, Chase became world renowned for her career in botany and for her work in agrostology, the study of grasses. Chase was originally interested in botany as a hobby. Her interest in plants began at her son-in-law's store in Wady Petra. In 1897, Chase began to collect specimens and to record her findings. On a plant collection trip in 1898, she met Ellsworth Hill, an amateur bryologist who studied moss and liverworts. He served as her mentor, taught her to use the microscope, and employed her to help him illustrate his findings. He encouraged her to apply for the job of

Botanical Artist at the USDA, where she worked under Albert Spear Hitchcock for 31 years. She began as an illustrator and soon became Hitchcock's research assistant and then assistant botanist. After Hitchcock's death in 1936, she became senior botanist, and soon after, in 1937, she became the Custodian of the Section of Grasses of the US National Museum; her responsibility there was the grass herbarium. She also helped international students by letting them stay in her house and by supporting them during their study in America.

Agnes achieved many things over the course of her career. She produced, for example, more than 70 articles about grass species. In 1992, she also published *A First Book of Grasses: The Structure of Grasses Explained for Beginners*. Agnes illustrated the book herself and revised it twice; in 1960, it was translated into Spanish. Agnes also made collection trips to various locations. Most of these were to South America, but she also worked in the United States, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Brazil. Her discoveries of new grasses were sent to the United States National Herbarium.

In addition to being a world famous botanist, Chase was also an activist and suffragist. She was a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliations, the National Women's Party, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She was also a socialist and a prohibitionist, and she did many notable things as a feminist. Chase, for example, was, in 1918, one of the first women to picket the White House. She was arrested, jailed, and began a hunger strike so that she had to be force-fed. She was also arrested for burning all of Woodrow Wilson's publications that contained either the word "liberty" or

“freedom” because he did not support women’s suffrage. Because of her radicalism, Chase was nearly removed from the USDA.

Chase received many awards for her contributions to agrostology. In 1956, the Botanical Society of America awarded her a certificate of merit, claiming she was “one of the world’s outstanding agrostologists.” Two years later, when Chase was 89 years old, she received an honorary degree from the University of Illinois. The Brazilian government also presented her with a service medal, and she was made the eighth honorary fellow of the Smithsonian Institution.

After 60 years of working for the USDA and other organizations, Chase had become a world-renowned agrostologist. She collected more than 10,000 grass species and discovered most of them. Chase eventually donated her entire grass herbarium to the Smithsonian Institution before she died in 1963 at the age of 94. [From Lesta J. Cooper-Freytag, “Mary Agnes Meara Chase,” *Women in the Biological Sciences: A Biobibliographic Sourcebook*. Ed. Louise S. Grinstien, Rose K. Rose, and Carol A. Biermann, eds.; “Mary Agnes Chase.” *Encyclopedia of World Biography Supplement*. Vol. 24. Biography Resource Center. Gale.
<http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy2.library.uiuc.edu/servlet/BioRC?vrsn=149&locID=uiuc_uc&ste=1> (Sept. 10, 2008); Marilyn Bailey Ogilvie, “Chase, Mary Agnes Meara.” *The Biographical Dictionary of Women in Science*; and Micheal T. Stieber, “Chase, Agnes.” *American National Biography*.]